

WARDEN MESSAGE

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This message is intended for the American community in Syria. If you have any questions, please contact the Consular Section at the above address. If you wish to be added to our e-mail distribution, we invite you to complete the enrollment process through our website. To access the site please enter the following link address <http://travel.state.gov> or directly, at <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui>

WARDENS: *Transmission of the following announcement by telephone is mandatory.*

Holiday Season Safety Tips

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As the holiday season fast approaches, U.S. citizens are advised to increase their general level of security awareness and take appropriate safety precautions. Secure your purse or wallet when holiday shopping in the souks and shops. The holiday season is also a time of travel, so unoccupied houses and apartments also offer excellent opportunities for thieves. Ensure you have locked your doors, windows, and grilles at your residence before you depart. Give clear guidance on access control to your home to your household staff. Such basic personal and residential security measures will help you and your family have a safe, secure and enjoyable holiday season.

While Damascus remains a relatively low-crime environment compared to other major cities, there appears to have been an increase in petty crimes during the past year. The following Safety and Security tips will help ensure that your holidays remain a joyous occasion:

Residential Security

Most families look forward to the holidays as an opportunity to travel. The following measures will help keep your valuables safe at your residence and your mind at ease when you leave town:

Lock all doors to your residence, and ensure that all outdoor valuables (bicycles, gardening equipment, etc.) are brought into your residence or locked in a shed.

Collect small valuables (jewelry, keepsakes, important papers, etc.) and secure them in a safe if possible.

Back up important computer files and secure the CD-ROMs or backup drive in an alternate location.

This is the season when individuals knock on doors asking for gratuities; such individuals may not have official documentation or ID cards identifying them as legitimate. NEVER allow anyone into your residence if you do not know them.

Keep your doors and windows locked and fully engage your locks.

Don't leave a spare key under the mat or in other "secret" hiding places. Experienced burglars have seen most of them before and know where to look.

Be careful to not flaunt expensive gifts to burglars by leaving empty gift boxes from your new computer, flat-screen TV, or DVD player on the curb. Break down the boxes and place them in large garbage bags to conceal your new items.

On the Road

Your chances of surviving a vehicle accident increase when you wear your seat belt. Small children's chances for survival likewise increase when they are secured in size-appropriate safety seats properly mounted in the rear of your vehicle.

Carry your cell phone with you whenever you are traveling in the car, no matter how short the journey. In the event of an accident, your cell phone is your lifeline to emergency medical assistance.

As always, drive with your windows up and doors locked, especially in city traffic, leaving sufficient maneuvering room between your vehicle and traffic in front of you.

Around Town

Shopping centers and souks are prime locations for property crime. Criminals seek out victims who appear distracted or who are carrying so many items that they cannot effectively safeguard their valuables. Shoppers are especially vulnerable when loading goods into their cars.

When shopping, carry only as many bags as you can comfortably control. Ensure that nothing can be easily snatched from your grasp. Your wallet, keys and cell phone should be in a secure location, and you should be especially wary of pickpockets.

Criminals often work in teams in order to divert a victim's attention. Be wary of street children, aggressive panhandlers or vendors, or anyone who attempts to draw your attention away from your belongings and surroundings.

If while shopping you decide to take some bags to your car in order to make a "second trip," consider relocating your vehicle to another section of the street or parking lot. Criminals may observe you loading and then leaving your vehicle, creating a very attractive target.

Don't leave anything of value exposed in your vehicle. Spare change or sunglasses in the ashtray, let alone expensive-looking packages on the seats, may be enough to prompt a "smash 'n' grab" attempt.

When using cash machines, be aware of "shoulder surfers" to deter theft of PIN numbers, and immediately pocket any cash before walking away. Carry only the cash and local credit/debit cards needed for day-to-day life, and secure other items in a safe place.

Mugging

Purse-snatching incidents are usually prompted by the desire for immediate financial gain. Generally (but not always), violence is a secondary consideration—the criminal's objective is to get your valuables, not to do you harm. *Your* objective, on the other hand, is to *survive the encounter*. Even an unarmed assailant can inflict fatal injuries.

Your best chance to end the confrontation is often to comply and surrender your valuables as instructed. Remember, your goal is *survival*: your belongings can be replaced, but you cannot be. If compliance does not end the encounter, the next best course of action is to create as much distance as you can between you and the criminal, and make as much noise as possible to attract attention and assistance.

Whether you're in Syria or back home in the United States, your best survival strategy involves taking steps to prevent the incident from taking place at all:

Criminals prefer to maintain at least a 1:1 ratio with their victims and often operate where and when they are less likely to be observed by witnesses and/or law enforcement. While the streets of Damascus are statistically quite safe, your chances of being a victim are further reduced when you seek out as many companions as possible when walking or jogging in low-traffic, remote areas, especially after dark.

Many criminals, however, study potential targets' patterns over time. Establishing predictable routines may increase your vulnerability to crime. Avoid using the same route every day at the same time for your commute and daily errands. Select several routes and randomly vary them.

Remain aware of your surroundings at all times. Body language that expresses alertness and confidence is a deterrent to would-be muggers.

Avoid carrying expensive-looking backpacks, camera bags, etc., as well as clothing and accessories that "mark" you as a potentially lucrative target. Carefully examine the contents of your purse/wallet with a view to culling those items you do not use locally.

Harassment of Women

Street harassment of women is widely reported in the region, and Damascus is no exception. While most reported incidents are limited to verbal harassment, incidents of rape and physical assault do occur.

Trust your instincts! If you believe the harasser is trying to force a physical confrontation, leave the area immediately and seek assistance in a well-lit, well-trafficked store or public area. Look to a uniformed police officer or security person for assistance.

Identify safe havens along your walking routes. Momentarily ducking into a store or other safe place may break the harasser's momentum and end the encounter.

Syrian police officers and security personnel will usually assist and intervene if approached by a foreigner in distress. Most young males will not persist in harassing you if they believe police intervention is imminent.

Avoid responding to verbal taunts. Responding to harassment may give the impression of being "interested" and may be interpreted as an invitation to further interaction.

For the latest security information, Americans living and traveling abroad should regularly monitor the Department of States Bureau of Consular Affairs Internet website at <http://travel.state.gov>, where the current [Worldwide Caution](#), [Travel Warnings](#), as well as the [Country Specific Information for Syria](#) can be found. Up-to-date information on security can also be obtained by calling 1-888-407-4747 toll-free in the United States and Canada or, for callers outside the United States and Canada, a regular toll line at 1-202-501-4444. These numbers are available from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday (except U.S. federal holidays).

The U.S. Embassy in Damascus can be reached 24 hours a day at 963-11-3391-4444; the fax number is 963-11-331-9678. The Embassy's web site, which includes consular information and the most recent messages to the American community in Damascus, is at <http://damascus.usembassy.gov>. You may also reach us by e-mail at DamascusConsular@state.gov or visit us on [Facebook](#).